

Dealing with Monsters by MagicMysticFantasy

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Summary:

In the aftermath of Season Two, Hopper drives Steve, Billy, and Max back to their houses. Things finally click for Steve, and Hopper has his back as they confront their final monster of the night.

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Author's Note:

This was a bit of a what-if scenario that I wanted to see happen but I couldn't figure out how to write until now. The sentence running through my head when writing this was "Hawkins protects their own", so feel free to feel that vibe when reading it, haha! Either way, I hope you enjoy!

Steve doesn't know what stirs him to attention. The world has been wavery and throbbing ever since he'd come down from his adrenaline high, and he's about ninety percent sure he has a bad concussion that's causing most of it. The rest is just exhaustion and physical aches from being in fight after fight tonight.

He lifts his head from the cool glass of the police car window, peering blearily out into the darkness. Hopper had offered to give him a ride, but had insisted on being the one to take Billy home when everyone showed up to find him still passed out in the Byers' house. Max had ended up tagging along, apparently feeling some kind of sisterly affection for Billy even still, though hiding it behind not wanting to make anyone make an extra trip to bring her home after everything.

The commotion of getting Billy's still-sluggish form out of the back of the police car is a team effort between Max and Hopper - especially since he seems somewhat resistant to the help they're trying to give, even dazed. Neil Hargrove waits in the doorway, drawn by the noise and with a glower on his features and his frame cutting a sharp figure against the light of the door. A timid woman who must be his wife peers out from behind him. Neither makes a single move to help.

Steve watches as the trio make their way up the driveway. He sees Billy go stiff at the sight of his father, the way he pretends to be more alert than he really is, and less injured. He sees the way Susan Hargrove's eyes dart towards her daughter but she makes no move to step past her husband. He watches the way Max tucks herself into Billy's side despite everything, and the cold light in Neil Hargrove's eyes as he watches his son.

“Thank you, Chief, for bringing my wayward son home,” Neil says, glancing dismissively at Billy. “And for giving my daughter a ride back too, of course.”

“Sure thing. You might want to keep an eye on him tonight though - I had to break up a fight between him and the other kid in my car,” Hopper half-lies, gesturing back towards Steve. “I’m taking him home now, but it seems that during the fight he got in a few hits and somehow dosed your son with a low-grade tranquilizer. He seems mostly over it, but better safe than sorry.”

“Really,” Neil drawls, his gaze gutting back towards Billy who is quiet and submissive and everything he never is. “A fight, you say. Well, thanks for letting me know, Chief, and I’m sorry for the trouble. I’ll assure you now that it won’t happen again.”

A little more is said, but Steve has stopped paying attention, watching as Max darts almost warily around Neil to get to her mother behind him. Billy hasn’t lifted his gaze from the ground still, and as Hopper turns back to the car, Steve sees Neil reach out to grab Billy’s shoulder, and the teenager’s aborted flinch at the gesture.

Maybe that’s what finally does it.

Steve swings open his door, resting one foot on the black tar of the street. He’s spent this entire night protecting others against the terrifying and strange and vicious. What’s a little intimidating and ordinary compared to that?

“Mr. Hargrove,” he calls out, catching both Neil and Billy’s attention, as well as Hopper’s as the man pauses to look at him on the way back to his car. He smiles the way his father taught him to at rival businessmen, allowing the dim light to catch on the purpling of his face and the blood on his teeth from his split lip. “You seem like a reasonable man.”

“I’d like to think I am,” Neil says slowly, eyes narrowed at him. Steve nods agreeably, ignoring the perplexed stares he’s getting from the other two watching him.

“Good, then this shouldn’t take long,” he says, smile fading to a thin

press of lips, only vaguely curled upwards. "Quite frankly, I'm exhausted right now, so I'll make this blunt: if Billy starts showing up with more bruises than what I gave him tonight, you and I are going to have a problem. Same goes for Max, though she and I obviously didn't get into a fight."

Neil rears back, eyes going wide with shock before rage twists his features. Billy's own eyes have blown wide as he stares at Steve, and Hopper has taken a sharp breath, casting his eyes back to look at the pair standing on the porch - no doubt trying to pick up on whatever he'd missed that Steve hadn't.

"Why, you -"

Steve shifts his leg so that his spiked bat glints in the light from the porch, and Neil cuts off abruptly. His eyes go from it to Steve, then to Hopper for a long moment, then back to Steve. Steve's only response is the same almost-smile as his fingers brush his bat.

"Hawkins knows how to get rid of monsters," he says, almost conversationally, barely hearing the slight wheeze from Hopper at the words. "Tread lightly."

"You're going to let this kid speak to me like that?" Neil finally finds his voice, turning to Hopper in his rage. "Threaten me like that, right in front of you?"

Hopper looks at him for a long moment, eyes drifting between him, Billy, and Susan who has reappeared behind Neil and is watching with a blank expression. He shrugs.

"I didn't hear any threats," he says smoothly, walking around to the driver's side of the car again, before looking back at Neil. "Kid's right. Don't believe us, you might want to ask somebody about exactly what happened to Lonnie Byers. Just saying."

He gets into the car, and Steve brushes his fingers across his bat one more time, before swinging his leg back into the car and shutting the door. Steve catches movement at the front curtain of the Hargrove-Mayfield house, and has to smother a smile, knowing he'll be hearing about this over the radios as soon as he gets home.

"You've got a saving-people problem," Hopper says as he turns on the car and begins driving towards the Harrington house. Steve snorts, then winces a little as it pulls at his bruises. "What tipped you off about Hargrove?"

"Wasn't just one thing," Steve says, resting his bruised face against the cold glass again the moment they're out of sight. "Lots of little things. Watching when we brought him home just made everything finally click."

They drive in silence for a while, before Hopper lets out a weary sigh. Steve tips his head towards him, and sees the frustration dulled by exhaustion on the chief's face.

"There was a time I wouldn't have missed that," the man says into the quiet. "Especially after Lonnie. I've been distracted lately, but that's no excuse. I'll be paying more attention from here out, kid, I promise you that."

"Can't see everything," Steve hums, closing his eyes. "You're as human as the rest of us. But we'll help fill in the gaps."

The car pulls to a stop a few minutes later and Steve opens his eyes to his large, empty house. It seems almost surreal to be going home again, after a night filled with demodogs, fistfights, fire, and more.

"You're a good kid," Hopper says abruptly, and Steve spins his head to look at him just a little too fast and has to swallow down a bout of nausea. "I'll be paying more attention to you too, from here on out. I should have been since last year - you were there for that too."

Steve can only blink at him, too tired and woozy to come up with a response to that loaded statement. Instead, he just shifts to grab his bat and groans, wincing at the pull of wounded muscle and tissue. He staggers his way out of the car and shuts the door, beginning to make his way inside when he hears the police car's engine cut out. He turns just in time to see Hopper climb out of the car.

"You do know my parents aren't home to explain things to, right?" he asks, frowning in confusion as much as he can through the bruise that is his face. "You don't have to come in."

"I told you," Hopper says, coming up alongside him, "I'm paying more attention this time around. Jane is fine with the Byers, and so are the rest of the kids. You're the only one on their own. Figure I'll camp out on your couch or something, make sure you don't die in your sleep tonight, then we can go and get Jane and your car tomorrow."

Steve stares at him.

A burning feeling spreads through his eyes and nose that has nothing to do with his injuries, and he glances away as he unlocks his front door. He's managed to force it down by the time the lock clicks, and Hopper doesn't mention whatever look he must have seen on Steve's face.

"Well then," he says, gesturing widely at the house that looks almost unlivable, aside from the few reminders of Steve's presence. "Welcome to the Harrington house. No need to sleep on the couch though - we've got more guest rooms than we know what to do with. Feel free to pick whichever."

"Sounds good, kid," Hopper says, following behind him. "Lead the way."